

# Controlling Baghdad Skies

Story and Photo by SPC Jacob Boyer

**T**HE soldiers of Company D, 1st Battalion, 58th Aviation Regiment, were helping pilots navigate the increasingly crowded skies over

Iraq's capital after taking over operation of the control tower at Baghdad International Airport in April.

"We were directly responsible for all aircraft entering and exiting the airspace around Baghdad," said SSG Andrew Lecuyer, then air traffic control tower chief. "We made sure everything was 'deconflicted.'"

The first group of soldiers to work in the tower arrived with a convoy of vehicles from the 4th Brigade, 3rd Infantry Division. The following morning, the air-traffic controllers began the task of moving their gear up 13 flights of stairs to the tower's control center, 140 feet above the ground.

At the time the tower was without power, Lecuyer said. Everything had to be carried to the top and connected by cables to generators on the ground.

"None of the work was really difficult," said SPC Montez Brown, an ATC specialist. "But lugging all that stuff up the steps was rough. We only had daylight hours, because once it got dark we had to observe light discipline."

"After setting up the operation, the Co. D soldiers had to make sure the

facility remained operational," said SPC Sean Bailey. "It required a lot of schlepping things up the stairs, including all our food and water."

While five soldiers worked eight-hour shifts in the control center, about a dozen others slept one floor below, Lecuyer said. Everyone considered the work important, he added. "We did everything from move aircraft on the ground to control them in the air," said Brown. "We were like a second pair of eyes for them, making sure the pilots and crews stayed safe when they were out flying."

Brown said he was thrilled when he reached the tower; most soldiers in the company considered it their final

destination in Operation Iraqi Freedom.

"It seemed like we'd waited a long time to get to where we were going," he said. "So everybody was pretty happy when we arrived. Some of the soldiers had never been up in a real control tower, so to say we controlled the skies from that tower, that's a pretty awesome thing."

Lecuyer said after the soldiers reached their final destination, their work continued as more and more aircraft moved to the airport. The soldiers of Co. D watched coalition aviators' backs until they handed over the job to Air Force controllers, who in turn passed the mission to Royal Australian Air Force controllers. 🇺🇸



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SSG Andrew Lecuyer and SPC Montez Brown of Co. D, 1st Bn., 58th Avn. Regt., keep track of radio communications in the tower of Baghdad International Airport.